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Wednesday, March 29, 1989

Notes on surprise, avoidance of reproach, secrecy, lies, crises...

It is particularly hard for an outsider, a non-participant, to make valid inferences or to learn useful lessons from observing or studying a high-level political "crisis," because of the special secrecy surrounding the decision-making process in such crises, secrecy that often persists for a quarter of a century or more and which is maintained in part by plausible lying by officials and former officials over that whole time.

Memoirs and supposedly candid interviews by retired officials long after the events demonstrate both gaps, concealments and deliberate lies, sometimes even after documentation giving the lie to earlier cover stories has become available.

reality
or
history
An example this year is continued denial by McNamara and McGeorge Bundy that serious planning for the possible invasion of Cuba was underway in October 1962 prior to the discovery of the Soviet missiles, although documentation of this was first published in 1987 and much more has now become available. Their comment on the plans that have been revealed is that this was "routine contingency planning," a description that I do not believe they can regard as truthful.

These plans, almost unprecedentedly, were directed and monitored by the President and the SecDef, aiming at a date for maximum readiness just three weeks away, giving rise to prepositioning of fuel and ammunition and force movements. There was probably no other case of such a planning "exercise" under Kennedy, except during the Missile Crisis itself.

There again the President, from October 22 on, had made no decision, no firm commitment, beyond blockade; indeed, I now think it quite likely that he and McNamara regarded the preparations for airstrike and invasion as mainly and probably a bluff. But would they regard that planning as "routine contingency planning" (even allowing for the difference that it was carried out essentially openly, for purposes of threatening)? If either of these was "normal, routine, contingency" planning, what would non-routine, emergency, abnormal, "serious" planning be?

There was not "bluffs" - it was a bluff. I don't know how to describe this, too involved with the whole "story" of post-1962 history.
Bundy, both in his book, in interviews with me, and on the Kwitny program, always deprecates the significance of planning activity that has been revealed, in this fashion. He emphasizes that the President has usually not made up his mind or committed himself, and even when he has, he may well change it. Therefore, he emphasizes, one cannot validly infer what the President was going to do, or even what he firmly intended, from planning

One cannot appropriately criticize or reproach a President for any planning done in his hand, or even preparations. (How about: planning + prep not done? "32y" have plans for something? OK yeah? To do what planning for X is to slight it for Y.)